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Rhetoric and reality in the White House

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THE distribution of power in the second Reagan administration finds precise expression in the decision to abide by the SALT II treaty even though it has not been ratified.

The White House rhetoric sounds tough. However, control over most substantive issues — foreign policy as well as taxes and the budget — has passed out of the White House. Mr. Reagan has been assigned the role of hanging semi-tough.

On budget matters the point is obvious. The serious work is being done by Budget Director David Stockman and the Republican Senate leadership under Bob Dole. The President has had to go along with their moves to cut defense and Social Security. He will probably have to go further as Dole and Stockman work out a compromise with the House Democrats. The threat of a veto — implied in the smart-aleck dare to "make my day" — is rhetoric.

On tax reform the work is being done by the Treasury under James Baker. In making accommodation with oil and gas interests, Baker turned around Reagan and the White House chief of staff and former Treasury Secretary, Don Regan. Similar adjustments may be worked out as the legislation moves through the House and Senate. Talk about a "Second American Revolution" is also rhetoric.

As to foreign policy, the heavy input comes from the State Dept. under George

Shultz and the National Security Council under Robert McFarlane. The Defense Dept., under Caspar Weinberger, and the Central Intelligence Agency, under William Casey, are consulted, of course, and their positions tend to be amplified by the White House noise-makers under Pat Buchanan. But Pentagon procurement scandals and defense budget problems have sharply reduced the Weinberger clout.

The big losers in the decision against renouncing SALT II were Weinberger, Casey and Buchanan. All three had laid great stress on Soviet "violations" of SALT II. Weinberger's chief guru on strategic matters — Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle — had advertised his views in a public speech on the subject. The rhetorical side of the White House had backed up the hard-line view by recalling that, in the 1980 campaign, Reagan had attacked the SALT II treaty as "fatally flawed."

But Shultz fought hard against a formal break with SALT II, and mobilized forces that could not be ignored. At a meeting of the NATO Council in Lisbon, allied foreign ministers to a man supported the Secretary of State in resisting an overt breach of the rules.

Earlier both Houses of Congress had passed by overwhelming majorities resolutions opposing formal denunciation. The clear implica-

tion was Congress would make the already sticky going on the defense budget a lot stickier if Reagan departed from the terms of the treaty.

The national security adviser, McFarlane, deftly appropriated the uniformed military. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked whether, from a strictly military view, it would be better to honor SALT II and its mechanism for checking violations or to kick free of the treaty restraints. Their judgment was that the military outcome was, in the words of one senior official, a "wash."

With that mandate in his pocket, McFarlane then drafted language that made it possible to honor the treaty for the time being while also nodding in the direction of the previous assertion that SALT II was "fatally flawed."

The key proviso, announced by Reagan yesterday, is to deactivate for six months a submarine due to be scrapped under SALT II. Thus Reagan awaits Soviet performance on arms control before finally going along with the treaty by totalling the sub. The President reserves the right to react in response to any actions by Moscow perceived by this country to be violations of the treaty.

The upshot is postponement of a deliberate effort to destroy the Geneva arms control negotiations. The talks can proceed for several more months before the U.S. thinks again about breaking the SALT II treaty in a way that might

lead to a Soviet disavowal of the whole process.

With a little progress in the Geneva talks, the treaty can be kept intact. Moreover, it is not as though the U.S. was leaving arms control success up to something the Russians couldn't deliver. It will be enough for Moscow to agree to a summit in the near future.

So the President's decision is a technical victory for Shultz and McFarlane. Those hoping for an easing of Soviet-American tensions have reason to sound two cheers. For the betting in Washington is that the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, will agree to a summit sometime before the Party Congress in February.

But if substance saved the day from rhetoric, rhetoric is not nothing. There is a difference between saying the wrong thing and saying the right thing, and it matters in national leadership. By saying the wrong thing, Reagan has so far marred his second term.

He has alienated the Democrats and a considerable fraction of his own party. He has put off the allies, and handed cheap propaganda openings to the Russians. He has failed to seize unambiguously the historic opportunities for a second term. Instead of rising to the statesman's role, he has made himself the faltering leader of an embattled ideological faction.